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ABSTRACT

A study was conducted to compare the criminal behavior of gang members and nongang at-risk youths in four urban and suburban communities, Denver (Colorado), Aurora (Colorado), Broward County (Florida), and Cleveland (Ohio). The first three communities were emergent, rather than chronic, gang environments, but in Cleveland, information on gangs dates back to 1986. In all, 187 interviews were conducted with gang members, and 194 with nongang members. Findings support other research that suggests that gang membership increases the likelihood and frequency that members will commit serious and violent crimes. Gang members at each site were also more likely to sell drugs than nongang at-risk youths. Both groups, however, reported that gangs do not control drug trafficking in their neighborhoods. This research also found that, contrary to popular belief, youths can resist overtures to join a gang without serious reprisals from members. Reprisals that were suffered were often milder than the initiations experienced by those who joined gangs. The median age for joining a gang was about 14 years, and the age of first arrest mirrored the age at which youths join gangs. Data on the escalation of criminal activity suggest that an important opportunity to intervene with gang members occurs in the early years of gang involvement. (Contains 8 exhibits and 15 notes.) (SLD)

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National Institute of Justice

Research in Brief

October 1998

Jeremy Travis, Director

Issues and Findings

Discussed in this Brief: An NIJ-funded comparative study of the criminal behavior of gang members and nongang at-risk youths in three urban and suburban communities. Additional data from a fourth site were gathered with funds provided by the Ohio Office of Criminal Justice Services through formula funding from the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention.

Key issues: Youth-gang-related crime has been growing for years, but little data existed about the extent and precise nature of crimes committed by gang members. This study explored the differences between the criminal behavior of youth gang members and nongang, but similarly at-risk, youths. The research suggests important implications for preventing involvement in and intervening in youth gang activity.

Key findings: The report corroborates other recent longitudinal and cross-sectional studies that suggest gang membership increases the likelihood and frequency that members will commit serious and violent crimes.

- The research shows that gang members in each of the survey sites are much more likely to sell drugs than nongang at-risk youths. Of those youths who sell drugs, gang members reported doing so more frequently, having fewer customers, making more money from the sales, and relying more on out-of-state suppliers than nongang youths who sold drugs. Both gang members and at-risk youths reported that gangs do not control drug trafficking in their communities.

- Most significantly, the research found that contrary to popular belief, youths can resist overtures to join a gang without serious reprisals from members. The majority of respondents who knew individuals who had

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Comparing the Criminal Behavior of Youth Gangs and At-Risk Youths

by C. Ronald Huff

For years, observers have noted that youth-gang-related crime has been growing, but a picture of the extent and precise nature of crimes committed by gang members is only now beginning to emerge. Are gangs really responsible for increases in crime or are youths who grow up in very difficult circumstances but do not join gangs committing just as many crimes?

This study explored the differences between the criminal behavior of youth gang members and nongang, but similarly at-risk, youths. The research revealed that criminal behavior committed by gang members is extensive and significantly exceeds that committed by comparably at-risk but nongang youth.[1] Furthermore, the research suggests important implications for preventing involvement in and intervening in youth gang activity.

A gang is described as a well-defined group of youths between 10 and 22 years old. Most research on youth gangs in the United States has concluded that the most typical age range of gang members has been approximately 14–24, though researchers are aware of gang members as young as 10 and that in some areas (e.g., southern California where some Latino gangs originated more than 100 years ago), one can find several generations in the same family who are gang members with active gang members in their 30s.

By all accounts, the number of youth gangs and their members continues to grow. For example, one recent nationwide study found 58 percent of the jurisdictions surveyed reported that they have active youth gangs.

There are an estimated 23,388 youth gangs with 664,906 members in all 50 States.[2] These numbers are probably conservative estimates[3] because many jurisdictions deny, often for political and image reasons, that there is a problem, especially in the early stages of youth gang development in a community.[4]

Responding to the growing magnitude of the problem, the National Institute of Justice (NIJ) sponsored a research project that focused on the nature and extent of youth gang behavior in Denver and Aurora (a large suburb of Denver), Colorado, and Broward County in south Florida. In addition, a companion study, underwritten by a research grant from Ohio's Office of Criminal Justice Services (with funds provided by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention),[5] explored the criminal behavior of gang versus nongang youths in Cleveland, Ohio, and the nature and extent of criminal behavior committed over time by a sample of leaders and hardcore members of youth gangs in Columbus, Ohio, dating to 1930.

Denver, Aurora, and Broward County were selected for this study because: (1) they provided emergent, rather than chronic, gang environments and opportunities to study gang formation at an early stage of development; (2) they comprised a combination of

Issues and Findings

continued...

refused to join a gang reported that those individuals suffered no consequences for their refusal. Reprisals suffered by those youths who resisted overtures to join a gang were often milder than the serious assaults endured by youths during their gang initiation. This finding provides an important component for gang prevention programs for at-risk youths.

- The study found a clear and consistent pattern regarding initial gang involvement and age at first arrest. Across all sites, researchers found that the median age at which youths began hanging out with gangs was approximately 13 years old. The median age for joining the gang was about 14 years old. The age of first arrest mirrored the age at which youths joined their gangs (14 years old).

- Data from the Ohio study suggest that gang members' criminal careers begin with property offenses (e.g., auto theft, burglary) and progress within 1.5 to 2 years to drug-related crimes and violent crime. The data suggest that an important opportunity exists for aggressive intervention during the early years of gang involvement.

- While many gang members and nongang, at-risk youths who sell drugs indicated they would not give up drug selling for less than $15 per hour, a significant number of them said they would accept far lower wages—not much more than is currently being paid in fast-food restaurants—if they could obtain a sufficient number of work hours per week.

- Gang members are much more likely than nongang members to possess powerful and highly lethal weapons.

- The criminal behavior committed by gang members is extensive and significantly exceeds that committed by comparably at-risk but nongang youths.

Target audience: Criminal and juvenile court officials, probation/parole officials, education administrators, youth workers, police and drug enforcement officials, State and local legislators and elected officials, researchers, and policymakers.

central cities and suburbs, providing an opportunity to assess differences within and across metropolitan areas; and (3) they are demographically diverse, as are the racial and ethnic compositions of the youth gangs in these areas.

Youth involvement in crime

Exhibit 1, compiled from interviews with gang members in Denver, Aurora, Broward County, and Cleveland, shows how deeply they are involved in specific types of criminal behavior.

While results vary from one region to another, the overall picture that emerges is that gangs engage in a wide array of criminal behaviors, including those involving weapons and violence. These data include only what gang members said about their own criminal behavior. The same general patterns emerged, but at much higher levels, when gang members were asked about other members' behavior.

Self-reported criminal behavior varies across sites and across regions for many reasons. With respect to this study, there

Exhibit 1: ***Type of Criminal Behavior in Which Gang Members Report Being Involved***

	Aurora N=49	Broward Co. N=50	Cleveland N=47	Denver N=41
Guns in School	53.1%	46.0%	40.4%	46.3%
Knives in School	50.0	58.3	38.3	37.5
Concealed Weapons	87.8	84.0	78.7	88.1
Drug Use	49.0	76.0	27.7	51.2
Drug Sales (School)	26.5	34.0	19.1	38.1
Drug Sales (Other)	75.0	58.0	61.7	64.3
Drug Theft	31.9	44.9	21.3	23.1
Drive-by Shooting	51.0	68.0	40.4	50.0
Homicide	12.2	20.0	15.2	19.5
Auto Theft	44.9	67.3	44.7	61.9
Theft-Other	59.2	80.0	51.1	52.4
Assault Rivals	81.6	94.0	72.3	71.4
Assault Own Members	31.3	40.0	30.4	26.2
Assault Police	28.6	22.0	10.6	31.0
Assault Teachers	26.5	16.3	14.9	26.8
Assault Students	58.3	66.0	51.1	53.7
Mug People	26.5	52.0	10.6	33.3
Assault in Streets	42.9	56.0	29.8	52.4
Intimidate/Assault Vict/Wit	39.6	46.0	34.0	47.6
Intimidate/Assault Shoppers	31.3	42.0	23.4	40.5
Shoplifting	57.1	62.0	30.4	47.0
Check Forgery	4.1	18.0	2.1	4.8
Credit Card Theft	12.2	46.0	6.4	9.5
Sell Stolen Goods	44.9	70.0	29.8	52.4
Bribe Police	12.2	10.0	10.6	11.9
Burglary (Unoccupied)	26.5	64.0	8.5	42.9
Burglary (Occupied)	8.3	34.0	2.1	14.6
Arson	12.2	12.0	8.5	14.3
Kidnapping	6.1	4.0	4.3	9.5
Sexual Assault/Molestation	4.1	4.0	2.1	0.0
Rape	2.0	4.0	2.1	0.0
Robbery	14.3	30.0	17.0	26.2

Study Design and Method

The information presented in this discussion is based on confidential interviews with youth gang members and nongang, at-risk youths in Denver and Aurora, Colorado; Broward County, Florida; and Cleveland, Ohio. The interviews averaged approximately 1.5 hours each and were conducted in neutral (and safe) locations. Also, a longitudinal tracking study of 83 key leaders and hardcore members of Columbus, Ohio, youth gangs was conducted to determine the pattern of their criminal careers over time.

Selecting the samples. The target samples for each site in Denver, Aurora, Broward County, and Cleveland included 50 gang members and 50 nongang, at-risk youths.

No single definition of "gang" enjoys consensus and there is significant variation across sites and law enforcement jurisdictions regarding their operational definitions of "gang." For this research, the gang samples were composed of individuals who passed two screening criteria: (1) the youths were perceived to be gang members by local law enforcement and social service agencies, and (2) the youths admitted they were currently active or previously active in a known youth gang. The samples were drawn from multiple referral sources, primarily social service outreach organizations operating community-based programs. This procedure has been used by many other researchers because no universal definition of "gang" exists and no single definition is accepted by all law enforcement jurisdictions.

The samples of nongang, at-risk youths—defined as individuals who were regarded by referral sources as being at risk of joining a gang but not having done so yet—were also drawn from multiple referral sources, primarily social service agencies and schools. Individuals were also asked directly whether they were currently active or formerly active in a gang.

Final gang samples included only individuals who personally acknowledged current or former gang membership and those for whom researchers had multiple sources corroborating their gang membership. The final nongang, at-risk samples included individuals who were regarded by referral sources as being at risk of gang membership and individuals who were initially referred as gang members but who later denied gang involvement and for whom no independent corroboration of gang membership existed. The final samples for the Colorado and Florida study included 140 completed interviews for the gang sample and 145 for the nongang, at-risk sample. The Cleveland samples consisted of 47 completed gang interviews and 49 completed nongang, at-risk interviews.

Although sample attrition was very low (6 to 7 percent for the gang samples and 2 to 3 percent for the nongang, at-risk samples), there was one problem with the final samples. The referral agencies—perhaps not surprisingly—concentrated on working with younger clients and more female clients than generally found in gang populations. These agencies and their referral sources may perceive that their chances of successful prevention/intervention are better with younger clients and females. Despite the best efforts of the research team, the study's at-risk samples were younger and more female than the gang samples. Only the Cleveland data revealed no statistically significant differences between gang members and nongang members for key attributes and variables, primarily due to the researchers' greater knowledge of both the gangs and the social service agencies' policies in that city at the time of this study. Therefore, only the Cleveland data concerning gang/nongang comparisons are presented in this discussion. Results from the Cleveland study, it should be noted, are also reflected in the findings from the other locations, although the final samples were not sufficiently comparable for scientific purposes.

Characteristics of the samples. For the Colorado and Florida sites, the gang members averaged 18 years of age and had completed the 10th grade. In Cleveland, gang members' average age was 16, and they had completed the 9th grade. Nearly 9 in 10 were male in all locations. African Americans comprised 50 percent of the overall gang sample; 25.3 percent were European-Americans (white), 16.1 percent were Hispanic-Americans, 1.1 percent were Asian-Americans, and 7.5 percent were of mixed racial heritage. Only 4 in 10 lived in a 2-parent family, and most of the others had little or no contact with their missing parent.

By comparison, the nongang, at-risk youths referred to the project averaged 15 years of age; about 7 in 10 were males; 73.7 percent were African Americans; 11.3 percent were European-Americans; 9.3 percent were Hispanic-Americans; 0.5 percent were Asian-Americans; 0.5 percent were Native Americans; and 4.6 percent were of mixed racial heritage. On average, they had completed nine grades of education. Slightly less than 4 in 10 had grown up with both parents, and most of the others seldom or never saw their missing parent.

Finally, for the Columbus tracking study, three former members of the Columbus Division of Police gang unit in 1996 were asked independently to list the key leaders and hardcore members of the city's gangs in that year and every year subsequent to their respective gangs. The three lists were compared and consolidated by including only names that appeared on at least two lists as either leaders or hardcore members. This yielded an initial list of 37 names. Subsequently, complete records were identified for 83 of these individuals and their official criminal histories were then tracked for this study.

are some age variations in the samples across sites and some differences across specific gangs with respect to the types of crimes they commit. Previous research on gangs has consistently found that there are topologies of gangs and that the criminal behaviors committed by the members of different gangs vary. With respect to such behaviors as drug sales and drug use,

Exhibit 2 ***Comparison of Gang and Nongang Criminal Behavior (Cleveland)***

Exhibit 2 ***Comparison of Gang and Nongang Criminal Behavior (Cleveland)***

Crime (p[1])	Gang N=47	Nongang N=49
Auto Theft (***)	44.7%	4.1%
Assault Rivals (***)	72.3	16.3
Assault Own Members (*)	30.4	10.2
Assault Police (n.s.)	10.6	14.3
Assault Teachers (n.s.)	14.9	18.4
Assault Students (n.s.)	51.1	34.7
Mug People (n.s.)	10.6	4.1
Assault in Streets (*)	29.8	10.2
Theft-Other (***)	51.1	14.3
Intim/Assault Vict/Wit (***)	34.0	0.0
Intim/Assault Shoppers (*)	23.4	6.1
Drive-by Shooting (***)	40.4	2.0
Homicide (**)	15.2	0.0
Sell Stolen Goods (*)	29.8	10.2
Guns in School (***)	40.4	10.2
Knives in School (***)	38.3	4.2
Concealed Weapons (***)	38.3	22.4
Drug Use (**)	27.7	4.1
Drug Sales (Crack) (***)	19.1	8.2
Drug Sales (Other) (***)	61.7	16.7
Drug Theft (***)	21.3	0.0
Bribe Police (n.s.)	10.6	2.0
Robbery Unarmed (*)	8.5	0.0
Burglary (Occupied) (n.s.)	2.1	2.0
Shoplifting (n.s.) (RSE)	30.4	14.3
Check Forgery (n.s.)	2.1	0.0
Credit Card Theft (n.s.)	6.4	0.0
Arson (*)	8.5	0.0
Kidnapping (n.s.)	4.2	0.0
Sexual Assault/Molest (n.s.)	2.1	0.0
Rape (n.s.)	2.1	0.0
Robbery (*)	17.0	2.0

Exhibit 3 ***Types of Drugs Gang Members Report Selling***

	Aurora N=49	Broward Co. N=50	Cleveland N=47	Denver N=41
Crack Cocaine	57.1%	38.7%	65.9%	63.4%
Powder Cocaine	24.5	51.0	26.1	41.5
Marijuana	57.1	73.5	48.9	62.5
PCP	6.3	14.3	4.3	12.2
LSD/Mushrooms	18.4	38.8	2.1	25.0
Heroin	6.3	17.0	4.3	14.6
Crystal Meth	10.2	14.6	4.3	9.7

Our national data produced by DUF (Drug Use Forecasting) studies reveals significant variation across sites and regions also.

Do gang members commit more crimes than their at-risk peers, or are the various forces that affect youths living in similar circumstances so compelling that criminal behavior is unrelated to the existence of gangs in these areas? Consider the following data from Cleveland, where the gang and at-risk samples were scientifically comparable by age, gender, race/ethnicity, education completed, work during the past year, and whether they grew up in a two-parent family.

As exhibit 2 shows, gang members are far more likely to commit certain crimes, such as auto theft; theft; assaulting rivals; carrying concealed weapons in school; using, selling, and stealing drugs; intimidating or assaulting victims and witnesses; and participating in drive-by shootings and homicides than nongang youths, even though the latter may have grown up under similar circumstances.

Drug sales. Gang members in all four sites are extensively involved in drug sales, especially cocaine and marijuana (see exhibit 3). The types of drugs sold vary from one region to another. The comparative data from Cleveland showed gang members sell significantly more cocaine than do nongang youths. Across the four sites studied, the relationship between race and whether a gang member sold drugs was statistically nonsignificant.

Researchers asked both gang and nongang interviewees about the dynamics of their drug sales, including how

Exhibit 4 ***Gang and Nongang Descriptions of the Nature of Their Drug Selling (Cleveland)***

Responses (p[1])	Gang N=47	Nongang N=49
Median frequency (***)	Daily	Daily
Median earnings/week (*)	$1,000	$675
Median customers/week (**)	30	80
Median percent of earnings kept for own drug use (n.s.)	0	0
Percent of drug sources, local (**)	31.9	50.0
Percent of drug sources, foreign (**)	26.1	12.5
Percent of drug sources, gang (**)	21.7	18.8
Median wages/hour required to stop selling (n.s.)	$15	$17

[1] Level of statistical significance: *p<.05; **p<.01; ***p<.001; n.s. = no significant difference
Based on subsample who do sell drugs (n = 11)

frequently they sell drugs, how much they make each week, how many customers they have each week, how much of their profits is spent on their own drug use, the location of their drug source, and (if known) the type of organization that sells them their drugs. They also asked a "tipping point" question: How much would the interviewee need to make in legitimate wages (per hour) to stop selling drugs? The data from Cleveland in exhibit 4 are comparable to the findings in the other sites.

Many gang members sell drugs, often daily. The majority of at-risk youths reported that they do not sell drugs. Those who sell, however, do so on a daily basis. Gang members reported earning about $1,000 per week from only 30 customers, while nongang youths earned about $675 per week, based on an estimated 80 customers. Gang members sell more expensive and profitable drugs and are better connected to nonlocal sources than nongang drug traffickers. Neither gang nor nongang drug sellers reported using their profits to buy drugs, except in Broward County, where gang members spent 20 percent of their earnings and nongang interviewees spent 5 percent of their profits to buy drugs.

Both gang members and at-risk youths reported that it would require average wages of $15 to $17 an hour to get them to stop selling drugs. While this figure reflected the median, it should be noted that about 25 percent of those sampled would accept wages of about $6 to $7 per hour—not much more than many fast-food restaurants pay today. They are tired of living with the fear that accompanies drug sales. However, as these young people often pointed out, it is difficult for them to find full-time work with one employer. It is also true, of course, that once one has a criminal record, it is more difficult to obtain regular employment.

Exhibit 5: ***Age At First Association With Gang To Age At First Arrest***

	Aurora N=49	Broward Co. N=50	Cleveland N=47	Denver N=41
1st Association	13.1	13.3	12.9	12.4
Joined Gang	14.2	14.3	13.4	13.5
1st Arrest	14.0	14.0	14.0	14.0

Exhibit 6: ***Gang Resistance and Consequences (Percent)***[1]

	Aurora N=49	Broward Co. N=50	Cleveland N=47	Denver N=41
Know Someone Who Refused to Join	59.2%	72.0%	71.2%	65.9%
Consequences: Physical Harm	6.1	16.0	12.1	17.5
Consequences: Nothing	36.7	44.0	66.7	30.0

[1] Interviewees were asked, "Do you know someone who refused to join a gang?" They were then asked, "Do you know the consequences of that refusal to join?" The disparity in the percentage figures above reflects the interviewees' lack of knowledge of the consequences for some youths who refused to join a gang.

Nevertheless, the evidence shows that drug sales are not controlled by gangs nor do drug sales represent an organized, collective gang activity. Quite to the contrary, research over the past 12 years suggests that most drug sales by gang members are individual or small-clique activities, rather than collective gang efforts.[6]

Guns. Interviewees were also asked about gun ownership among the members of their gang or (for nongang youths) their peers. In all four sites, nearly 75 percent of gang members acknowledged that nearly all of their fellow gang members own guns. Even more alarming, 90 percent of gang interviewees reported that gang members favor powerful, lethal weapons over smaller caliber handguns. Between 25 and 50 percent of nongang youths said their peers own guns, and about 50 percent stated that their friends owned powerful, lethal weapons. The gang/nongang differences were statistically significant across all four sites—that is, gang members are significantly more likely to own guns and more likely to own powerful, lethal weapons.

From "wannabe" to first arrest. How long does it take from the initial stage of "hanging out" with a gang (often called the "gang wannabe" stage) before a youngster is arrested for the first time? The findings across all four sites were remarkably consistent, as shown in exhibit 5.

Based on the survey sample taken at the four sites (in three States), youngsters generally begin hanging out with gangs at 12 or 13 years of age, join the gang at 13 or 14 (from 6 months to a year after they first hang out with the gang), and are first arrested at 14. Young adolescents are most vulnerable to the seduction of gang membership at a time when physiological, sociological, and psychological factors, including a strong need for peer acceptance, are acting upon them.

Gang resistance and consequences. Many young people believe they will be physically punished if they refuse an offer to join a gang. At the same time, schools and other social organizations across the country have launched gang resistance education and training programs. Therefore, it seemed important to ask gang interviewees whether they knew of individuals who refused to join the gang and, if so, the consequences of their refusal.

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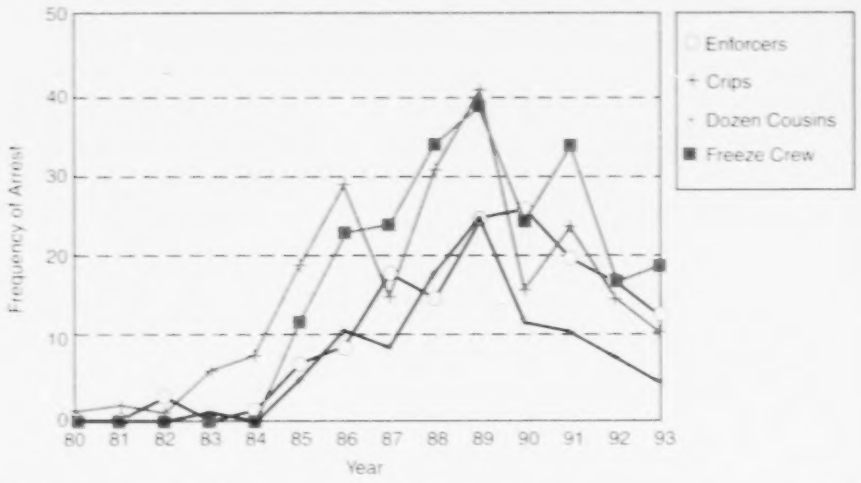
As exhibit 6 shows, reality differs dramatically from the intuitive beliefs held by many young people—consistently across all four sites. Clearly, the cost-benefit ratio favors gang resistance, especially if one resists politely, without "disrespecting" the gang or its members.[5] In instances in which youths resisted gang overtures and suffered physical reprisals, their injuries were seldom serious. Media accounts of gang killings and serious assaults on youths who refuse to join the gang paint an exaggerated picture. The reality is quite the opposite.

Another finding tips the scales even further in favor of resisting gang membership. The most common initiation ritual reported in all four sites involves gang members assaulting ("beating in" or "jumping in") the new recruit to prove that he is "tough," "can take it," and "has heart." Thus, youths who respectfully refuse to join a gang face very good odds that nothing serious will happen to them;[6] on the other hand, those who join a gang usually suffer serious physical assault as an initiation rite. In addition, data indicate that gang involvement significantly increases one's chances of being arrested, incarcerated, seriously injured, or killed. These factors must be presented to youths who may be attracted by the glamour and excitement of gang life.

Tracking gang leaders and hardcore members

The final component of this study focused on the nature and magnitude of the criminal behavior of 83 individuals who in 1990 were key gang leaders and hardcore gang members in Columbus, Ohio. Researchers examined their arrest histories (from 1980 to 1993) to see if their gang involvement triggered their criminal career. Very few arrests occurred prior to the mid-1980s (when gangs emerged in Columbus), but thereafter the frequency and seriousness of gang members' criminal behavior accelerated dramatically, as shown in exhibit 7.

Exhibit 7 **Total Arrests for 83 Gang Leaders and Members (Columbus)**



The great majority of these arrests occurred in the 7-year period between 1985 and 1992. An important positive correlation exists between when these individuals joined gangs and when their arrest histories accelerated. The correlation coincides with the data presented in exhibit 5. It is important to note that they were arrested for violent offenses (37 percent), property offenses (29 percent), drug offenses (13 percent), weapons offenses (6 percent), and other offenses (10 percent). Arrests began to decline in 1992, based on the following factors:

- **Incarceration.** Serving jail time temporarily halts new arrests.
- **Death.** At least 7 of the 83 gang leaders had already died. Coroner's records for six of them indicated that all died violent deaths (five by gunshots, one by strangulation).
- **Law enforcement reorganization.** Like many other communities, Columbus experienced a surge in the crack cocaine market during the mid-1980s, prompting the police to consolidate the gang enforcement unit with the narcotics bureau. Police resources were scarce, and it was perceived that many gang members were selling drugs. As a result, less attention was paid to newly developing gangs, and more intelligence and enforcement activity was directed toward narcotics trafficking, most of which was not gang related.[7]

Finally, the study sought to determine whether these gang leaders committed more serious offenses over time or whether their first offenses were serious. This information is important in assessing the developmental stages of gangs and in developing appropriate prevention, intervention, and suppression strategies. For all four of Columbus's major gangs, evidence showed a clear progression in serious offenses, based on a time series analysis of when each gang's arrests peaked for property crimes, drug offenses, and violence. Exhibit 8 illustrates this pattern for each of the four gangs separately and for an aggregate "progression window" for the four gangs combined.

These data suggest a progression in gang crime from property offenses to violent crimes and drug-related

Exhibit 8: ***Progression in Seriousness of Offenses (Columbus)***

Gang	N	Arrests	Peak Prop.	Peak Drugs	Peak Viol.
Crips	25	219	1988	1989	1989
Freeze Crew	19	227	1988	1989	1989
Enforcers	14	154	1987	1990	1989
Dozen Cousins	9	105	1987	1989	1989

Progression from Property Offenses to Drug Offenses: +1.75 Years
Progression from Property Offenses to Violent Offenses: +1.50 Years
Progression from Drug Offenses to Violent Offenses: −0.25 Years

crimes. The progression takes about 1.5 to 2 years, depending on the specific gang and first offense. The data also mirror the close connection between drug trafficking and violence, especially since the mid-1980s.[10]

Policy implications

Education and prevention. Youths who join gangs tend to begin as "wannabes" at about age 13, join about 6 months later, and get arrested within 6 months after joining the gang. By age 14 they already have an arrest record. This underscores the urgent need for effective gang-resistance education programs and other primary and secondary prevention and intervention initiatives directed at preteens, especially those prone to delinquent and violent behavior.[11]

Resisting overtures. Young people can refuse to join gangs without substantial risk of physical harm. Moreover, they are far better off to resist joining gangs than to expose themselves to the beating they are likely to take upon initiation and the increased chances of arrest, incarceration, injury, and death associated with gang membership.[12]

Windows of opportunity for intervening. Because prevention programs will not deter all youths from joining gangs, it is also important to address the brief window of opportunity for intervention that occurs in the year between the "wannabe" stage and the age at first arrest. It is vital that intervention programs that target gang members and successfully divert them from the gang are funded, developed, evaluated, improved, and sustained.[13]

A second opportunity to intervene occurs between the time gang members are first arrested for property crimes and their subsequent involvement in more serious offenses. This period, which lasts about 1.5 to 2 years, affords a chance to divert young offenders from the gang subculture before they further endanger their own lives and victimize other citizens. Gang members are more likely than their nongang peers to sell higher profit drugs, underscoring the need for prevention and early intervention programs designed to divert "wannabes" before they become hooked on illegal earnings. Successful intervention at this stage (with, for example, prosecutorial diversion programs targeting first-time, gang-involved property offenders) can still save lives (of both offenders and victims) and save society the enormous cost of arresting, convicting, and incarcerating serious offenders.

While many gang members and nongang, at-risk youths who sell drugs indicated they would not give up drug selling for less than $15 per hour, a significant number of them told researchers they would accept far lower wages—not much more than is currently being paid in fast-food restaurants—if they could obtain a sufficient number of work hours per week. Employers often split job slots into part-time jobs that offer few or no fringe benefits, a widespread practice within the fast-food industry.

Early warning signals. Data suggest that gang members are especially likely to commit the crimes highlighted in exhibits 1 and 2. A sudden increase in these crimes may serve as a "distant early warning signal" that the community needs to consider local gangs in the context of its overall crime problem. Crimes that are especially worth monitoring closely (and can realistically be monitored) include auto theft, bringing weapons to school, and drive-by shootings.[14]

Weapons. Gang members are likely to possess powerful and highly lethal weapons, although many gang members are not old enough to legally drive a car. Efforts to reduce the number of illegal weapons possessed by youths and adults should be emphasized to reduce gun-related crimes.[15]

Notes

1. Longitudinal cohort studies in Denver, Rochester, New York, and Seattle have provided extensive data that demonstrate the relationship between criminal behavior and gang membership. Youths are more involved in delinquent and criminal behavior while active in gangs than either before they join or after they leave gangs. See Esbensen, Finn-Aage, and David Huizinga, "Gangs, Drugs, and Delinquency in a Survey of Urban Youth," *Criminology* 31 (1993): 565–589; Thornberry, Terence P., et al., "The Role of Juvenile Gangs in Facilitating Delinquent Behavior," *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency* 30 (1993): 55–87; and Battin, Sara R., et al., "The Contribution of Gang Membership to Delinquency Beyond Delinquent Friends," *Criminology* 36 (1998): 93–115.

2. Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, *Highlights of the 1995 National Youth Gang Survey*, Fact Sheet #63, Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 1997; also see Curry, G. David, Richard A. Ball, and Scott H. Decker, in "Estimating the National Scope of Gang Crime From Law Enforcement Data," *Gangs in America* (2nd edition), Huff, C. Ronald, editor, Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications, 1996: 21–36.

3. Estimates range as high as 1.5 million gang members in the United States. See Knox, G.W., "The 1996 National Law Enforcement Gang Analysis Survey," *Journal of Gang Research* 3 (1996): 41–55.

4. For a more detailed discussion of the stages that communities often go through, see Huff, C. Ronald,

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editor, *Gangs in America* (1st edition), Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications, 1991.

5. The Ohio sites were originally proposed as part of the NIJ study, but the willingness of Ohio's Office of Criminal Justice Services to fund the additional study permitted researchers to include five sites in the overall research instead of only three.

6. Klein, Malcolm W., *The American Street Gang: Its Nature, Prevalence, and Control*, New York, New York: Oxford University Press, 1995; Fagan, J.E., "Gangs, Drugs, and Neighborhood Change," in Huff, C. Ronald, editor, *Gangs in America* (2nd edition), Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications, 1996: 39–74; Becker, S.H., and B. Van Winkle, *Life in the Gang: Family, Friends, and Violence*, New York, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996.

7. Over the past 12 years of interviewing gang members, the author has developed a gang-resistance strategy anchored in the cognitive dissonance theory of psychology—which postulates the difficulty of accepting two competing ideas at the same time. Gang members, who generally state that they love their mothers dearly, frequently recognize that they have disappointed them by their criminal behavior. Youths attempting to resist gang involvement might tell gang members that they respect them and might *like* to join the gang, but that their mother disapproves, and they do not want to show disrespect to her. Gang members in overwhelming numbers told researchers that they would not join the gang if they could make that decision again, and they do not want their siblings to join gangs. They may recognize in retrospect that the youth, in respecting his mother's wishes, is doing what they themselves wish they had done.

8. Even when gang members reported that the consequences of gang resistance were physical in nature, they indicated that these nearly always resulted in only minor injuries.

9. Although many youth gang members sell drugs, youth gangs do not control drug markets in the United States and do not account for most drug sales in major urban areas. For a useful and concise discussion of street gangs and drugs, see Klein, Malcolm W., *The American Street Gang*.

10. For an extensive discussion of related issues, see Zimring, Franklin E., et al., "Guns and Violence Symposium," *Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology*, 86 (1996): 1–236.

11. For an overview and assessment of appropriate intervention and prevention strategies, see Goldstein, Arnold P., and C. Ronald Huff, editors, *The Gang Intervention Handbook*, Champaign, Illinois: Research Press, 1993; Klein, Malcolm W., *The American Street Gang: Its Nature, Prevalence, and Control*; Spergel, Irving A., *The Youth Gang Problem: A Community Approach*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1995; Tonry, Michael, and David Farrington, editors, *Building a Safer Society: Strategic Approaches to Crime*, Chicago, Illinois: University of Chicago Press, 1995; and Sherman, Lawrence W., et al., *Preventing Crime: What Works, What Doesn't, What's Promising*, Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, 1997.

12. The mortality rate among the study sample of 83 Columbus gang leaders and hardcore members far exceeds the expected death rate for adolescent males of comparable ages.

13. The key to developing successful intervention programs is to conduct rigorous evaluations that carefully assess what works for whom and under what circumstances.

14. For additional discussion of crimes that appear to be especially related to gangs and crimes that the media often mistakenly attribute to gangs, see Klein, Malcolm W., *The American Street Gang*.

15. Recent successful projects to reduce gun violence occurred in both Kansas City and Boston. See Sherman, Lawrence W., James W. Shaw, and Dennis P. Rogan, *The Kansas City Gun Experiment*, Research in Brief, Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice, National Institute of Justice, 1995 and Kennedy, David M., Anne M. Piehl, and Anthony A. Braga, "Youth Violence in Boston: Gun Markets, Serious Youth Offenders, and a Use-Reduction Strategy," *Law and Contemporary Problems* 59 (1996): 147–196.

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Findings and conclusions of the research reported here are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official position or policies of the U.S. Department of Justice.

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